"To Question Ever Deeper Who We Were and Who We Are as a People and as a Nation": A Discourse Analysis of Public Meaning-Making about the Tuam Babies in Letters to the Editors of The Irish Times

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Abstract

The Republic of Ireland had the highest rates of institutionalisation per capita outside of the Soviet Union in the twentieth century through institutional structures including Mother and Baby Homes, Magdalene laundries, and residential schools. A Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation report indicates that 57,000 babies were born in Mother and Baby Homes to 56,000 women between 1922 and 1998. Few publicly spoke about their experiences until recently. When a mass grave of babies born in the Tuam Mother and Baby Home was found in 2014, the topic of Mother and Baby Homes entered public discourse in a new way. This paper explores, through discourse analysis of letters sent to the Editors of The Irish Times, how public meaning-making in the wake of Tuam opened up, as Irish citizens engaged in a sense-making process in the public sphere of this contested past. The analysis highlights that letter writers struggled with complex emotions raised by the finding of the Tuam mass grave and furthermore, the writers argued that Tuam has implications for the collective narrative of who we are - and were - as an Irish people and as a nation. The analysis captures the efforts of letter writers to negotiate a workable contemporary collective narrative that struggles to acknowledge the horror of the past while living in the Ireland of the present.

Keywords: *Mother and Baby Homes; Tuam; Discourse Analysis; Collective Identity; Shame; Guilt*

1. Introduction

In June 2014, reports of an unmarked grave of almost 800 babies' bodies in a disused septic tank dominated the national news in Ireland, and was also reported by international news

agencies (e.g. Al-Jazeera-America, 2014; Corporation, 2014; Dalby, 2014; Kuruvilla, 2014; McCoy, 2014; O' Reilly, 2014). The babies were buried at a Mother and Baby Home, an institution for unmarried mothers during the twentieth century, at a time when to be unmarried and pregnant was a stigmatised identity in Ireland. In media reports a narrative about how Ireland historically treated unmarried mothers and their babies was centred on an initial sensationalist headline "Mass Septic Tank Grave containing the skeletons of 800 babies at site of Irish home for unmarried mothers" (O' Reilly, 2014). While there had been recent symbolic representations of women's experiences of Mother and Baby Homes with the film *Philomena* (Frears, 2013) and a number of memoirs that indicated harsh treatment of women in these homes, some commentators have noted that the narrative treatment of Mother and Baby Homes had been "beyond discourse" (Shildrick, 2018, p. 2). This rapidly changed after June 2014, with a public outpouring of grief in response to the reports of the babies' bodies, buried contrary to cultural tradition, instigating a flood of public meaning-making about historic treatment of unmarried women and their children in Mother and Baby Homes. A national conversation started resulting in the establishment of a Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes, tasked with (amongst other aims) establishing the entry and exit pathways of women into these homes as well as their children's welfare while there, and burial practices (Commission of Investigation: Mother and Baby Homes and certain related matters, Order, 2015). The findings of that Commission have recently been published, and have been criticised for dismissal of survivor testimony as "not evidence" of human rights abuses (e.g. Loughlin, 2021).

This paper, however, is interested in the immediate expansion of discursive space about Mother and Baby Homes, following the initial media reports of the babies' burials at Tuam in June 2014, and again in March 2017 when the Commission of Investigation confirmed that in fact the babies were buried in the disused septic tank. This paper analyses how the public meaning-making about this once unspoken past was mediated through Letters to the Editors (LtEs) of The Irish Times where writers talked of how the reports of the Tuam mass grave mobilised complex emotions including anger, shame, guilt at a nation struggling to reconcile itself to a historic wrong. The results section argues that LtEs highlight an ongoing negotiation of how this past should be remembered. We explore dilemmas of remembering and forgetting and an attempt by letter writers to work through National Shame at historic mistreatment of women and children, to establish a workable narrative of the past for contemporary Irish society. This is arguably a socially distributed struggle in the public sphere to stake out the implications of

Tuam for an Irish collective identity. The conclusion draws attention to the fact that this remains a contested project as survivors of institutions struggle for their calls for justice to be heard and addressed formally by the State, with the past always seen through the lens of the present.

2. Mother and Baby Homes

First, we will explore what were Mother and Baby Homes. Mother and Baby homes were religious run maternity homes for unmarried women, a highly stigmatised identity in Irish society for much of the twentieth century. Initially established in the 1920s, they were part of a wider institutional network which included industrial and reformatory schools, Magdalene laundries, psychiatric institutions (asylums), prisons and borstals (Smith, 2007). Smith (2007) refers to this as Ireland's architecture of containment, indicating an institutional impulse to conceal. This impulse was so prevalent that it led to about one per cent of the population institutionalised by the 1950s (O'Sullivan & O'Donnell, 2012). Without family or state support, pregnant unmarried women had few options but to go to a Mother and Baby Home (O'Toole, 2014; Garrett, 2017). There were 57,000 babies born to 56,000 women in the 18 Mother and Baby Homes between 1922 to 1998, recently researched by the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes and related matters (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2020). The number, however, for this period is likely to be much higher when other Mother and Baby Homes are taken into consideration. Other reports indicate that the homes facilitated illegal adoptions (Buckley & McGregor, 2018) with Milotte (1997) suggesting that at least 2000 Irish children were sent to the US from 1950 to 1980, potentially trafficked. Babies were used for medical testing by universities and pharmaceutical companies (Dwyer, 2014), without consent (Steed, 2018). There are ongoing allegations that women were mistreated, including through the involuntary adoption of their children, but these have been refuted by the recent Commission of Investigation. Human rights and survivor activists indicate the continual denial of recognition and redress for these experiences in contemporary Ireland, making what is often framed as an historic experience, an ongoing human rights violation, with contemporary ramifications (e.g. O'Rourke et al., 2018).

2.1 Tuam as a watershed moment

While this public reckoning is ongoing at the time of writing, the initial media reports of the Tuam grave was a watershed moment for Irish society, where a 'before' and 'after' public awareness of the mass grave is evident. The public response to Tuam was the moment in which women and children's experiences of Mother and Baby Homes began to be widely and publicly

discussed, in a way that had heretofore been peripheral, and as Shildrick (2018) suggests "beyond discourse" (p. 2).

Arguably, given the scale of institutionalisation in Ireland documented above, the reason such experiences were "beyond discourse" was that institutions and institutionalism created a form of social or perpetrator trauma (Giesen, 2004). Such trauma has been used to explain silences or narrative gaps around shameful past experiences, particularly when the collective is implicated in wrong doings (Giesen, 2004). In some contexts, it can take generations for such traumatic silences to be broken, and shameful past events to be integrated into nation's narrative identities (Mitscherlich & Mitscherlich, 1975; Alexander, 2004; Giesen, 2004; Assmann, 2012; Brockhaus, 2012; Buckley-Zistel, 2012; Burnett, 2012). Giesen (2004) suggests that there is a prolonged period of denial before there is acceptance of wrong. This is followed by public conflicts and rituals of confession, before an objectification of the past through commemoration (Giesen, 2004). We are arguably in Ireland at the public conflict phase of negotiating this historic wrong, in which narratives that "tell[s] us who we are, where we come from and where we should be going" (Liu & Hilton, 2005, p. 537) are negotiated through public engagement with the past.

Ahmed (2014) further suggests the importance of attending to the emotions mobilised through such a public reckoning with the past. In research exploring the affective response to the Australian Stolen Generations report she argues that emotion can be viewed as cultural practice rather than psychological state; rather than residing in the individual or the collective, emotions (like anger, shame or guilt) circulate and form the very boundary of objects, subjects, and even social structures like the nation. In the public reckoning about the Stolen Generations, the trope 'national Shame' was used to acknowledge past wrong but also functioned to absolve individuals from feelings of guilt, and by implication from reparation (Ahmed, 2014). Ahmed (2014) also notes that "by witnessing what is shameful about the past, the nation can "live up to" the ideals that secure its identity of being in the present" (p. 109). So through drawing on 'shame' rather than guilt, the nation is reconstructed, as 'we' mean well, and can work to reproduce the nation as an ideal, enabling the movement from national shame to national pride in addressing historic wrongs. Applying this concept to Ireland, Enright and Ring (2020) suggest that such performances of 'national shame' detach shame from survivors:

> transforming it from a deeply personal injury to a matter of national authority and identity from the subjective experiences of survivors, which the sovereign State is

> uniquely competent to understand and address… Accordingly, the State seeks to dictate the terms on which the shame of the past is cleansed… It owns both the injury and the remedy, and it can control and contain how both are understood. (p. 6)

While some work has examined the role of the State narrative and discourse on controlling and harnessing shame in response to Ireland's institutional past (e.g. Fischer, 2017; Enright & Ring, 2020), less work has focused on the public use of discourse and affect to make sense of this past. This paper engages with the question of how Irish society negotiates Tuam as a moment of societal transition that addresses this contested past. We are particularly interested in how what is "beyond discourse" (Shildrick, 2018, p. 2) comes into public discursive space. Wetherell (2000) suggests that in discursive spaces there is usually contestation about how to understand things. For this reason, discourse analysis was used to examine LtEs in light of affect (emotion), contestation and sense-making. The findings show that letter writers were trying to grapple with the narrative or collective identity of the nation and in particular they reflected on how shame was harnessed to construct the nation.

3. Methodology

In June 2014 and again in March 2017 thousands of articles, opinion editorials and letters were published about Tuam in Irish newspapers. This paper is part of a wider doctoral study which examined 197 of Letters to the Editors (LtEs) published in June 2014 and March 2017 about Tuam in three national newspapers: The Irish Times, The Irish Independent and The Irish Examiner. The dates of June 2014 and March 2017 were chosen due to their resonance in the unfolding narrative about Mother and Baby Homes. In June 2014, the media depictions of the mass grave led to a Commission of Investigation and a public outpouring of emotion. In March 2017 this Commission of Investigation confirmed that the remains of children were buried at the Tuam site. Drawing on Ahmed's work on cultural emotions (2004) we investigated the role of emotion in the Letters, and in particular how it was used as a resource to support people in making sense of this contested past.

For pragmatic and space reasons, this paper focuses only on the letters addressed to The Irish Times, and in particular on five exemplars of how emotion was rhetorically used to construct the national response. Data analysis drew on both a bottom-up approach advocated by discursive psychology (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Edwards & Potter, 1992) and a top-down approach aimed at examining the relationship of discursive formations to power and ideology (Willig, 2013). Iterative data analysis led to the formation of a number of interpretative

repertoires. This paper will focus specifically on a collective responsibility repertoire in conjunction with the rhetorical use of effect such as shame and guilt.

4. Findings

We have chosen five exemplars to illustrate some of the ways in which emotion is used in tandem with interpretive repertoires about responsibility for the past treatment of women and children in Mother and Baby Homes. Within the cohort of letters examined here, a space is created by the writers to make sense of what was coming into the public domain through media depictions about Mother and Baby Homes. The majority of letters responded to what had been a top-down silencing about this past, evident still today in moves by government in 2020 to seal the Mother and Baby Homes archive, which has been resisted by advocates and members of the public (e.g. O'Rourke, 2020). Throughout the letters, a moralising space about responsibility is created, in which letter writers negotiate collective responsibility for past wrongs, what Tuam means for collective identity and what implications it has in the present. In this paper, we focus on exemplars that address how emotions of shame and guilt are rhetorically used to negotiate who the nation is, and how this past can be integrated into collective identity, or not.

In the first two letters we explore how this narrative identity of the nation is negotiated in two different ways. The first letter suggests a cautious approach in integrating the Tuam mass grave as fact until the Commission of Investigation's inquiries have taken place. The second suggests a need to dig up the unheard stories of the Mother and Baby Home past and to integrate them. In both letters, the emotion of shame is either implicit or explicit and is used to construct the nation, with implications for collective remembering or forgetting.

4.1 Collective identity: Whether to integrate Tuam or not?

Extract One: Letter to the Irish Times, 9 March 2017, Male, Galway

Sir, - Brendan O'Neill has a point (Opinion, March 9th). I have been confused for some days as to what has been actually been established in the Tuam investigation. There is a shocking narrative in the public domain that is significant enough for us to question ever deeper who we were and who we are as a people and as a nation. We have seen and heard much over the years to understand that we were not the decent, pious people we liked to tell ourselves. We now know we were petty, hypocritical, sexually repressed and voraciously cruel to those who failed to conform.

However, the story that we were callously dumping dead babies into sewers simply does not compute.

The importance of getting this right cannot be underestimated and there is far too much loose reporting going on.

There is enough awfulness to go around without prematurely adding to the trauma of alluding to "facts" that have not yet been established. We need a fuller report.

In extract 1, there is evidence of partial acknowledgement of mistreatment of unmarried mothers, but the writer suggests that the burial of babies in a disused septic tank at Tuam "does not compute". The narrative that is being constructed following the mass grave reports is described as "shocking" with profound ramifications for what it means to be Irish ("who we were and who we are as a people"). So the writer's concern is about collective identity and what the emerging narrative might mean for "who we are".

The Tuam narrative challenges core assumptions about Irish collective identity as "decent" and "pious" and instead entails the need to acknowledge the collective character as "petty, hypocritical, sexually repressed and voraciously cruel." Women who had children outside of marriage are defined as "those who failed to conform," indicating strict societal norms. While the writer accepts these aspects of the collective character, it is the mass grave that is "shocking" to him and does not fit with the narrative of the nation he understands. The publicness of the Tuam narrative is bothersome with caution urged in "we need a fuller report". He is opposed to the idea that "we were callously dumping dead babies into sewers". The writer urges caution in integrating the mass grave into the existing narrative, drawing on trauma rather than shame, to suggest caution.

Extract Two: Mother and Baby Homes, Irish Times, 12 June 2014, Male, Wicklow

A chara - The recent disclosures about the Tuam babies, unearthed by local historian Catherine Corless, brings home to us again the importance of coming to terms with the past.

The English historian E.H. Carr observed that history is a dialogue between past and present. Here we have a case of the sad facts of our relative recent past clashing violently with perceptions we cherish of ourselves in the present.

The task of the local historian is a particularly difficult one. In every community there are taboo areas, subjects which are just too close to the bone for many

people. But unless we understand and acknowledge where we have come from, how can we decide where our futures should be? In digging beneath, the surface in Tuam, Catherine Corless has done her own community and all of us some service.

In extract two, the Tuam grave is suggested in "recent disclosures" and similarly to extract one, the writers construct a dissonance between what this emerging narrative means for collective identity, in "clashing violently with perceptions we cherish of ourselves in the present". This indicates a generational shift in what extract one describes as "who we were and who we are". Once again, there is frequent use of 'we' to indicate a collective identity dilemma.

A resistance to reminders of shameful collective behaviour is constructed throughout the text, as for example when it is affirmed that "In every community there are taboo areas, subjects which are just too close to the bone for many people". The use of "too close to the bone" conjures up truths that are hurtful or raw. Breaking the taboo poses a collective identity threat ("in every community"), evoked in the rhetorical questioning in lines 9 and 10 in "But unless we understand and acknowledge where we have come from, how can we decide where our futures should be?" Sibley and Liu (2012) suggest that history helps explain how nations face contemporary problems, and that there is often historical negation, that is reluctance to consider historic inequalities by mainstream society for fear of the impact of redistribution or reparations might have on present day economic realities. This writer uses a rhetorical question to suggest the need to confront the past, and the collective's part in it ("where we have come from") in order to forge a presumably fairer future. Thus this letter advocates integration of what occurred at Tuam into the narrative of the nation.

A metaphor of unearthing, digging beneath the surface is used to position Catherine Corless, the local historian whose research uncovered the Tuam situation, as bringing to the surface previously hidden or unacknowledged information, or countering a denial of high infant mortality at the Home. The writer constructs this boundary-crossing as important for Irish collective identity, by maximising the sense of collective responsibility, in this instance through the use of "all of us" suggesting a shared responsibility for past treatment of women and children. In this way, the uncovering of shame is constructed as something that must be faced and integrated rather than denied.

4.2 How to integrate Tuam?

Many of the letters in the wider cohort sought to counter a denial of the integration of Tuam into the national narrative, while others sought to continue to deny what occurred as a strategy to protect interests in the present, including collective identity. By March 2017, the LtEs in The Irish Times emphasised commemoration. Extract three draws on the idea of institutionalising the past in school curricula to counter implicatory denial that is a form of denial, where political, moral or psychological implications are denied (Cohen, 2001). This is achieved through drawing on the emotion of shame once again.

Extract Three: Tuam Mother and Baby Homes, Irish Times, 7 March 2017, Female, Galway

A chara, – Our politicians are currently looking to the German reunification experience to help us find a roadmap for dealing with Brexit. Germany may also provide some signposts for navigating another Irish upheaval. The German language has a word which, loosely translated, means dealing with the atrocities of the past (Vergangenheitsbewaeltigung). It represents the idea that what happened during the second World War cannot be denied or forgotten; school children, for example, must study this element of their history.

In light of what is emerging at the Tuam mother and baby home, where babies' bodies were dumped in a sewage system, is it not time for the Irish people to confront our unsavoury past and the atrocities committed against women and children?

An awareness and critical analysis of the collusion of the Catholic Church and the Irish state in the dehumanisation of some of its most vulnerable citizens should be part of how we face up to our historical shame. We could include this on our school curriculum. We owe it to our young people and to those women and children who suffered.

In this extract, an analogy with Germany is used to advocate the inclusion of shame-inducing past into the narrative of the nation, through the German concept of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* 'process of coming to terms with the past' (Collins, n.d.). Denial then is countered through a push to institutionalise collectively remembering ("must study this element of their history") as a duty ("cannot be denied or forgotten") as central to national identity. The juxtaposition of Germany who remembers, and Ireland who forgets, implicitly equates Mother and Baby Home wrongs with the Holocaust. The strategy of comparing

Germany and Ireland is a rhetorical strategy similar to Pomerantz (1986) extreme case formulation, which brings in discursively extreme constructs as ways of legitimizing claims. In this instance, the analogy with the Holocaust is used to guard against denial by contrasting Ireland with the German nation, who has reckoned with their sinister past.

Through the rhetorical question "is it not time for the Irish people to confront our unsavoury past and the atrocities committed against women and children?" the writer persuasively advocates for Irish society to confront the past. The use of "Irish people", "our" and the continued use of "we" throughout the extract, evokes collective responsibility in which "we are all in this together" implies both responsibility as well as the need to collectively counter denial. In this letter, collective responsibility is not used as a way to diffuse responsibility, rather there is emphasis on Church and State responsibility.

Ahmed (2014) suggests that shame-inducing events can lead us to turn way; this letter writer urges society not to turn away from its responsibility, and denial is further countered through a call for "awareness and critical analysis of the Catholic Church and the Irish State as part of the collectives" response to the past, positioning the Church and State as duty-bearers with responsibilities. This analysis is framed as part of the collective response to shame ("how we face up to our historical shame.") This emphasis on Church and State in some way inoculates the public from the worst effects of shame. However, shame is reclaimed again in "our historical shame" whilst also distancing from it through the term 'historical'. In this move from 'their' shame – (referred to the Church and State) to "our" shame, the nation is constructed through shame, and a way out of shame is offered through inclusion of the narrative in curricula "we could include this in our school curriculum." This is identified as important for both survivors (those women and children who suffered) and the current generation (youth) with an implicit call to never forget what occurred under the collective watch.

Extract Four: Tuam Mother and Baby Home, Irish Times, 7 March 2017, Female, Dublin

I believe the State and Catholic Church should fund a "Forest of Forgiveness", planting a tree for every child's body exhumed in Tuam. It would be a place to go not only to remember each child, discarded namelessly into a hole in the ground, but a place where all of us can go to ask forgiveness as a nation for the shame with which the church has shackled us.

In this letter, the writer suggests that a "forest of forgiveness" is an appropriate commemoration for Tuam, with the planting of a tree, a symbol of new life, and with it a changing of the narrative. "Forgiveness" implies restoration of emotion and of the harm created through the Mother and Baby Homes system. It implies a resolution to the societal rupture, and it suggests an ending. Collective responsibility is nuanced through an "othering" of responsibility to the Church and State in lines 1 and line 5, distancing the collective from any harm associated with the shame of Tuam. While this shame is depicted as national, it is positioned as "shame with which the church has shackled us" thereby protecting collective identity, and positioning the Church as ultimately responsible.

While the previous two letters focus on the effect of national shame, extract five, advocates commemoration, while also emphasising the need to focus on collective guilt (rather than shame) as a way to implicitly move towards national pride.

Extract Five: Tuam Mother and Baby Home, Irish Times, 10 March 2017, Male, Dublin

Sir, – It is evident that the state and its citizens in general share to a degree with those who ran and supervised the mother and babies' homes and the Magdalen laundries the shame of this horror and the cruelty it inflicted on the most vulnerable. It seems to me that a proper memorial in a prominent position should be erected. Such a memorial should be funded by public contributions, thereby acknowledging the manner in which the public, many of whom knew and turned a blind eye, share some of the guilt for the suffering of the many women and young girls of the nation.

In this extract, the writer both argues for commemoration through a monument, and also retribution through public contributions to pay for the cost of the memorial, as a form of collective atonement for both "shame" (line 3) and "guilt" (line 7). Collective responsibility is once again evoked, although this is nuanced ("in general share to a degree with those who ran and supervised the mother and baby homes and the Magdalen laundries") positioning those that managed the institutions as ultimately responsible. Smesler (2004) suggests that:

> to memorialise is to force a memory on us by the conspicuous and continuous physical presence of a monument; at the same time a memorial also conveys the message that now that we have paid our respects to a trauma, we are now justified in forgetting about it. (p. 53)

By seeking to find a resolution to the Tuam situation through a "prominent memorial" paid for by the taxpayer, the writer tries to find a resolution to the rupture created by the collective responsibility implied in the letter and by public reactions to Tuam. He also seeks to counter denial by those "who knew and turned a blind eye" indicating a by-stander guilt of the collective.

5. Discussion

In this paper, we have explored five exemplars, through LtEs to The Irish Times, of public meaning-making about Mother and Baby Homes at two temporal points. We focused on how collective identity dilemmas are negotiated through the interpretative repertoire of collective responsibility, combined with rhetorical strategies that mobilise shame and guilt. Ahmed (2014) indicates that nations dealing with similar contested pasts can sometimes seek to address national shame by confronting it in some way, thereby moving to an 'ideal' of nations within a global discourse of human rights, enabling the collective to feel pride in addressing past wrongs. We find that the letters opened up a moralising space where national shame and responsibility is negotiated, and a number of potential ways forward are signalled. Letter writers have not yet reached what Ahmed (2014) would construct as pride. Rather, what is constructed in the letters is a national identity crisis created by the public knowledge of the mass grave at Tuam, and the wider implications this uncovering has for understanding the historic treatment of women and children in Irish society, and, by implication Irish society in general. This 'shocking narrative' (extract one) creates a collective identity dilemma, and a rupture in the narrative of the nation that needs to be resolved in some way. Letter writers argue for a variety of ways in which this resolution can take place, many (particularly in 2014) argue for denial to continue, whilst others (particularly in 2017) argue for acknowledgement of this past and for a collective reckoning. The exemplars we have illustrated indicate that one way forward is commemoration, including through a monument, "a forest of forgiveness" or the inclusion of the Mother and Baby Homes in national school curricula. Shame and guilt are used in various ways in the letters to construct the nation. Collective responsibility is implied and guarded against in a number of ways – notably through allocating blame to the Church and State and the management of the institutions, or through constructing it as "historic."

The dominant emotion in these exemplars is shame. Shame was used historically to conceal pregnant unmarried women in institutions, and in this type of shame the women and children lose their very subjectivity. Shame does not permit those who are shamed to separate themselves from how others view them, hence the institutional impulse to conceal. Enright and

Ring (2020) suggest that shame is a loss of sovereignty and that in contrast, the use of "national shame" takes away the power of the victim survivors right to their own shame and to reclaim it. It is used to construct the nation, the Church and the State as acting shamefully in their treatment of women and children, but in the exemplars there is a rush to memorialise (extracts four and five) through commemoration and curriculum rather than a listening to survivors' voices. There is an urgency of addressing what might be shameful for Irish collective identity through either investigation (extract one), or confrontation (extracts two and three). Ahmed (2014) suggests that shame targets identity, and the letter writers seek to negotiate how to address national shame, its implications for collective identity, and letter writers negotiate what it might be like for shame to construct the nation.

Additionally, they suggest ways forward. The contestation about how to publicly reckon with the past is similar to public negotiation of other contested pasts in other contexts where there was been social and/or perpetrator trauma (e.g. Mitscherlich & Mitscherlich, 1975; Alexander, 2004; Giesen, 2004; Assmann, 2012; Brockhaus, 2012; Buckley-Zistel, 2012; Burnett, 2012). In such contexts, the impact that such traumas have is firstly to render what has occurred taboo and unspeakable, followed by a period of moralising and debate about responsibility. What is less commonly discussed is the impact of these past experiences on women and their (now adult) children in the present. What we find is that as letter writers contend with the past, what is of concern in this time period is collective identity and how shame may taint it through either integrating Tuam, or denying it, rather than enabling survivor voices to reclaim shame. Guilt is briefly mentioned but is similarly "closed" through memoralisation, rather than leading to restorative social action.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, we indicate that Tuam acts as an important moment for Irish public's negotiation of collective identity. Tuam creates an identity dilemma for the collective, who risk being positioned as perpetrators in historic mistreatment of women and children. While institutions such as Mother and Baby Homes have been largely absent from public narrative until recently, the LtEs indicate that the public are negotiating how to address this past through drawing on repertoires of collective responsibility together with rhetorical uses of affect such as shame and guilt to integrate Tuam into the narrative identity of the nation. Discourse of affect indicates the presence of shame as a mediator for historic silences which facilitated the institutions; shame in both acknowledging the past (extract one) and not acknowledging it (extracts two to five). All of these strategies seek a resolution to the rupture that Tuam inflicts on the collective.

However, few letters speak about the need to support the women and children that might be directly affected by Tuam and the Mother and Baby Home past. Collective repertoires (perhaps unintentionally) invisibilize individual experiences, while emphasising collective identity dilemmas.

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